Warren Denton Seafood Company

CT-1293

Broomes Island, Calvert County, Maryland

1932-1954

Private Access

The privately owned Warren Denton Seafood Company building is located at 3946 Oyster House Road at Broomes Island, Maryland. The 1.3-acre property site is accessed via an asphalt paved lane extending east from the public road. The Denton building was constructed beginning in 1932 on filled marshland at the mouth of Island Creek, a tributary of the Patuxent River. Arthur Gatton built the original weatherboard sheathed, one-and-one-half story frame building with metal roof and concrete foundation for company partners Warren Denton, John Denton, and Ballard Rogers. The structure was built to house a seafood business that packed and distributed the famous "Patuxent Brand" oysters and operated at this site until 2001. During its nearly seven decades of operation, at least thirteen additions, alterations, or replacements were made to the building. When it closed in 2001, the sprawling building enclosed 9,632 square feet.

Maryland Historical Trust Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties Form

historic	Property	11/2	n Donton 0.	Common	,			
			en Denton &	Company				
other	Warren Denton	Seafood						
2. Location								
street and number	3946 Oyster Ho	use Rd.						_ not for publication
city, town	Broomes Island							vicinity
county	Calvert							
3. Owner of	Property	(give name	es and mailin	g address	es of al	owners)	
name	Louis P. Stone I	П						
street and number	P.O. Box 241					-	telephone	
city, town	Dowell			state	MD		zip code	20629-0241
5. Primary l	Prince Frederick		nal Data		parcel	15	tax	ID number
Contr	ibuting Resource in ibuting Resource in mined Eligible for the mined Ineligible for ded by HABS/HAE	Local Historic ne National Re the National F	District gister/Maryla	Section of the sectio				
Reco Histor	ic Structure Report : Calvert Marine M		Report at MH	T				
Reco	: Calvert Marine M		Report at MH	Т				

7. Description		Inventory No. CT-1293
Condition		
excellent	deteriorated	
x good	ruins	
fair	altered	

Prepare both a one paragraph summary and a comprehensive description of the resource and its various elements as it exists today.

Summary:

The Warren Denton & Company, Inc., seafood business at Broomes Island, Maryland, operated from this location from 1932 until it closed in 2001. It grew from an oyster house into a large seafood processing and packing facility enclosing over 9,600 square feet. Company records and supporting documentation account for at least fourteen phases of construction including additions, alterations, and replacement during its nearly seven decades of operation at this location.

Description:

From 1926 to 1932 the Warren Denton seafood business operated from a small building on Island Creek. In 1932, Arthur Gatton and Bernard Dean were contracted to build a new oyster house on a lot that Warren Denton had purchased in 1927. Gatton and Dean filled in the marshland at the mouth of Island Creek with oyster shells and built the oyster house near the water's edge on the low-lying fill. Financial accounts from the company show that it cost \$2,541.57 in materials and labor. Purchases of building materials recorded in the accounts include lumber from H. Trueman, cement, roof metal, and paint. This oyster house was a rectangular frame building with metal clad gable roof, concrete foundation, and concrete floor. It was one-and-a-half stories in height and measured about 46 feet by 42 feet with an exterior brick chimney on its northeast gable end.

Accounts show an addition to the packinghouse was made in 1934 at a cost of \$1,096.79. Building materials listed in company records include cement, lumber and paint. This addition was probably a gable roof structure made on the building's northeast gable end facing Island Creek.

A major improvement was made to the packinghouse in 1935 with the installation of a steam powered ice-making plant and the construction of cold storage rooms. The onsite manufacture of block ice facilitated the storage and shipment of fresh seafood and enabled the company to increase production. The investment in the building and machinery was \$3,147.25. A shed roof wing was built on the northwest side of the packinghouse to accommodate the machinery and cold storage rooms. A concrete icebox to store the manufactured block ice was also constructed at this time.

As the company's business grew, the seafood processing facilities kept pace. Company records indicate that a new building addition was made to the packinghouse in 1936 at a cost of \$1,780.00. An April 1938 aerial photograph depicts the oyster house as a long narrow gable roofed building with a shed wing on its northwest side. The 1936 addition was evidently built on the northeast gable end of the packinghouse. It contained an oyster shucking room with large awning windows along its southeast and northwest sides.

During 1938, \$4,625.00 was invested in equipment and building. The 1938 addition was probably built on the northeast gable end of the 1936 addition at the water's edge. It functioned as the shell stock room for the storage of unprocessed oysters that were unloaded from boats onto the adjacent dock.

Another addition was made to the plant in 1939 at the cost of \$1,400.00. This was probably a shed roof addition on the southeast side of the packinghouse. Photographs from the early 1940s depict a large and well-maintained seafood processing plant. By that time, the original building had broad shed roofed wings on both its southeast and northwest sides. The northwest wing contained cold storage rooms and the ice making plant. A small gable roof addition extended northwest from the wing. An oyster shucking room lit by large southeast and northwest facing awning windows occupied an addition attached to the northeast end of the original building. Another large cold storage shell stock room where unprocessed oysters in the shell were stored was attached to the northeast of the shucking room at the water's edge. The building was clad in weatherboard siding and the window and door trim were painted white.

Maryland Light and Power extended electrical service to Broomes Island in 1942. In the Spring of that year, electricity was also introduced to the packing plant. Company accounts record a payment of \$444.25 to Stark Electric Company to wire the building and a \$10.00 payment to Maryland Light and Power in May 1942. Additional payments for electrical wiring work were made later in 1942 and in 1943.

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Company records make reference to a "new addition" to the oyster house in 1945. In August and September 1945, \$1,395.63 was paid to H. B. Trueman for unspecified materials. This may refer to the shed roof lunchroom for the workers or possibly an extension to the shed roof wing along the southeast side.

A fire at the seafood plant in January 1947 seriously damaged a portion of the structure. A contemporary photograph shows that the fire destroyed the southeast wing and damaged the adjacent part of the main structure. Company records demonstrate that the fire damage closed the plant for the remainder of the oyster season. The wing's roof and exterior walls were completely rebuilt and the roof pitch was altered in the process. Accounts show that in April 1947 the Mutual Fire Insurance Companies made payments of over \$15,000 to cover the company's losses.

At some point, possibly as part of the 1947 construction, an office and bathroom were added to the second floor loft. The fenestration on the upper portion of the main façade was altered from one centrally located window to an asymmetrical arrangement of two windows to provide light to the office and one window to light the stairway. The remainder of the open loft continued to be used to house empty retail containers and spare equipment.

According to Fern Denton Conner, the upstairs office proved useful for storing records, but was too far removed from the workspace on the first floor. As a consequence, the Dentons built a small frame office projecting from the front façade. It was elevated one step above the ground floor to help protect it from flood tides. This office addition is visible on a July 2, 1952, aerial photograph of the area.

A two room insulated, refrigerated addition with a flat roof was added to the northwest side of the structure after the 1952 aerial photograph was taken. This addition contained an insulated door on the building's front façade to facilitate access for delivery trucks. Company records show that during the summer of 1953, a total of \$2,725.82 was paid to the Prince Frederick Building Supply Company. These payments may relate to the construction of the insulated addition.

The company upgraded its plant building in 1975 when it contracted to have its weatherboard siding sheathed with insulating asphalt siding with a simulated stone design. At the same time, the windows were replaced with aluminum sashes and a new asphalt shingle roof was installed.

Due to a variety of factors, the Denton family closed the plant at the end of the 1982 season. By that time, it was the last of the working packinghouses in Calvert County and the last major seafood business on the Patuxent River.

Norman Dorrell began leasing the property in 1984 and reopened the business with the intention of operating a year round seafood packinghouse. The Denton family retained ownership of the building and grounds while Dorrell operated the business as Warren Denton Seafood.

The two room insulated addition on the northwest side of the building was rebuilt in 1994. Covered with a flat roof, the northern room was rebuilt in April and the southern room was rebuilt in September of 1994, as evidenced by inscriptions in their walls. The insulated door on the southern wall was replaced with a larger insulated sliding door to increase access for delivery trucks.

Dorrell made several additions to the plant. A large detached prefabricated flat roof insulated concrete block refrigerated storage building was constructed on the northwest side of the packing plant in 1980s or 1990s. Its high roof and large sliding door allowed delivery trucks to back up into the building for loading purposes.

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When Dorrell branched out into processing hard crabs, a modern, insulated, and sanitary addition was made to the southeast side of the plant to accommodate crab pickers and satisfy Maryland health and hygiene regulations.

Several insulated refrigeration trailers were incorporated into the processing plant during the 1980s and 1990s along the southeast side to increase cold storage space. These trailers were connected to the crabmeat processing addition.

In the face of declining crab harvests and increasing competition from foreign seafood packers, Norman Dorrell declared bankruptcy in 2001 and Warren Denton Seafood closed its doors for the last time. In 2002, the Denton family sold the property to a local restaurateur.

8. Signific	ance			Inventory No. CT-1293
Period	Areas of Significance	Check and j	ustify below	
1600-1699 1700-1799 1800-1899 xx 1900-1999 2000-	agriculture archeology architecture art commerce communications community planning conservation	 economics education engineering entertainment/ recreation ethnic heritage exploration/ settlement 	health/medicine industry invention landscape architecture law literature xx maritime history military	performing arts philosophy politics/government re religion science social history transportation other:
Specific dates	1932		Architect/Builder Art	hur Gatton
Construction da	ites 1932, 1934, 1935, 1	936, 1938, 1939, 1945	, etc.	
Evaluation for:				
-	National Register	N	laryland Register	not evaluated

Prepare a one-paragraph summary statement of significance addressing applicable criteria, followed by a narrative discussion of the history of the resource and its context. (For compliance projects, complete evaluation on a DOE Form – see manual.)

Summary:

Warren Denton & Company, Inc., was one of the largest seafood packinghouses on the Patuxent River. Located in the Broomes Island community of Calvert County, Maryland, the business began in 1926 and moved to its present location on Island Creek and the Patuxent River in 1932. For seventy-five years, the company provided employment to hundreds of local workers as well as a market for watermen. Producing the famous Patuxent Brand oysters, three generations of the Denton family contributed to the early success of the company. After the family closed the plant in 1982, Norman Dorrel revived the business and continued operating under the Warren Denton name until the end of 2001 when Calvert County's last seafood packinghouse closed.

Description:

Company records, supplemented by oral history accounts and contemporary newspaper articles, document the development and success of the seafood business while operated by the Dentons. The growth of the seafood business is mirrored by the evolution of its packing plant that grew from a small building to a sprawling complex enclosing over 9,600 square feet.

The origins of the company are noted in the Calvert County Circuit Court License Records that show John and Warren Denton of Broomes Island applied for their first Oyster Packers License in November 1926. Trading as Denton Brothers, they operated from a small building on Island Creek owned by Dave Elliott. In the spring of 1928, Ballard Rogers joined the partnership.

In 1932 the partners contracted to have a their own oyster house built on Broomes Island on a lot that Warren Denton had purchased from Wilson and Lillie Elliott in 1927. Arthur Gatton and Bernard Dean filled in the marshland at the mouth of Island Creek with oyster shells and built the oyster house on the low-lying fill. During the 1932/33 season, the company shipped 43,256 gallons of oysters.

The partnership suffered two setbacks in the early 1930s. As a result of economic depression the Eastern Shore Trust Company closed to reorganize. The Denton brothers and Rogers had to sign personal notes to keep the business operating. In 1933, tidal surges associated with the devastating August hurricane flooded the oyster house and washed out its contents. The interior of the structure had to be refinished and refurbished but the oyster house was back in operation by mid-September.

The company rebounded from these hardships. In a 1980 interview, Ballard Rogers stated "The best years for operating a business were in the early '30s when labor was cheap, overhead was low, and there were plenty of oysters, crabs, and fish." Company records show that the effects of the hurricane did have a negative impact on the company's oyster production. The company shipped 36,257 gallons of oysters during the 1933/34 season, a decrease of nearly 16% from the previous season. John Denton left the partnership in 1934.

A major improvement was made to the packinghouse in 1935 with the addition of an icebox and steam powered ice-making plant. The onsite manufacture of block ice facilitated the storage and shipping of fresh seafood. The investment in the building and

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machinery was \$3,147.25. Oyster production increased to 92,159 gallons during the 1935/36 season and 112,409 gallons of oysters were packed and sold by the business during the 1936/37 season. Oysters were packed, iced, and shipped by boat to such markets as Norfolk. In addition, the company used a refrigerated truck to ship to other markets including Baltimore, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh.

In the summer season, the business handled fish and soft crabs. According to Rogers, it was not unusual to process 1,000 to 2,000 dozen soft crabs a day. Watermen harvested them with crab seines and sold their catches to the company for one cent a crab. The crabs were packed for shipment using seaweed collected from the shores of Broomes Island.

During the 1940s, over 100 oyster shuckers were employed at the business in addition to packers, laborers, office personnel, and boat crews. In 1943, Charles W. Denton, Warren Denton's son, returned from service in the U.S. Coast Guard and became a partner in the company. After World War II, the company began dealing almost exclusively in oysters and closed during the summer season.

A fire at the seafood plant in January 1947 seriously damaged the structure. It destroyed the southeast wing, damaged the main structure and closed the plant for the remainder of the oyster season. The wing's roof and exterior walls were completely rebuilt and the roof pitch was altered in the process. Accounts show that in April 1947 the Mutual Fire Insurance Companies made payments of over \$15,000 to the business to effect repairs.

By 1950, the oyster house had grown into a sprawling frame and cinder block oyster processing and packing plant. During the peak season the company employed a workforce of 110, including about ninety shuckers.

To supply the oysters needed to operate a large packing facility the business dredged oysters from beds leased from the State of Maryland in the Patuxent River and its tributaries in addition to buying oysters from local watermen. The *Lancaster*, purchased in 1945, was used as a dredgeboat on the company's leased oyster grounds in the Patuxent River and its tributaries. The *Lillian T.*, bought in 1951, was used as a buyboat to purchase oysters from independent watermen. The company planted its leased beds with seed oysters harvested from the James River, the Wicomico River, and other locations.

Like other Patuxent River oyster houses, the majority of the oyster shuckers, boat crew, and laborers were African Americans from the surrounding communities. Both men and women shucked oysters and were paid by the gallon. Packers and floormen working in the oyster house were paid a weekly wage. Men were also employed as boat crew or delivery truck drivers and were paid weekly.

Conroy Butler began working at the business as an oyster shucker in 1952. There were nearly 100 shuckers employed at the plant at that time and he could not always get a box due to the competition for work. As he became more experienced and his speed increased he was able to shuck a gallon of oysters in thirty-five to forty minutes. He and other shuckers would sometimes work thirteen to fourteen hour days. In his early years at the plant, there were more men shucking oysters at the plant than women.

Ruth Mackall Smith also began shucking oysters at the plant in 1952. At that time, the shuckers earned less than a dollar a gallon and they were responsible for providing their own knives and aprons. Depending on the size of the oyster, she could shuck as many as two gallons an hour. It was not uncommon for the shuckers to sing spiritual songs that they had learned in their churches to take their minds off their tedious chores.

To facilitate transportation to the packing plant, the Dentons had two buses to pick up workers from nearby communities. Ruth Mackall Smith drove one of the buses for a while. She would leave by 4:30 a.m., travel as far as Huntingtown Beach to pick up workers, and arrive at the packinghouse at 6:00 a.m.

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In the 1954 through 1960 Annual Census of Manufacturers, the company reported over 100 employees working at the plant during the height of the oyster season.

During this time period, customers included other seafood packinghouses, wholesalers, chain stores such as A&P, and other large retail outlets. Several trucks were employed by the company to distribute its product to market. John B. Mason, in addition to working as boat crew, was a part time delivery truck driver for the Dentons. He mostly hauled oysters to the A&P in Baltimore but during the busy holiday season he drove to distributors as far away as Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

After 21 years with the company, Ballard Rogers retired from the seafood business in 1959. The partnership between Rogers and the Dentons was dissolved and Warren and Charles Denton continued to operate the company as partners. During the 1959/60 packing season, the company processed over 470,000 bushels of oysters and shipped 100,662 gallons of oysters.

The number of employees averaged around 80 from 1962 through 1964. After Warren Denton's death in 1964 a new partnership was formed among Charles Denton, his sister Fern Denton Conner, and their mother Grace Denton.

In 1967, 68 workers were reported employed at the plant. The Denton partnership was dissolved in 1970 when the company was incorporated. The officers included Charles Denton as president, his son Joseph Denton as vice-president, and Fern D. Conner as secretary-treasurer.

Beginning in the early 1970s, a series of events caused the local oyster population to plummet. In 1972, heavy rains associated with Hurricane Agnes lowered the river's salinity and runoff caused increased pollution and siltation. This combination devastated the Patuxent River oyster crop. As a consequence, the Dentons scaled down their efforts to restock their leased beds in the Patuxent and its tributaries. With the decline in the local oyster supply, the company was forced to increasingly rely upon imported oysters that raised production costs. Around the same time, the company experienced a labor shortage as construction jobs and other opportunities outside the seafood industry became more common.

In 1972 and 1973, as a response to the labor shortage, the Denton Company partially automated the plant with the installation of a conveyor system. The system delivered oysters in the shell from cold storage to the shucking tables in overhead buckets and removed the empty shells on a conveyor belt that deposited them outside the plant. This replaced the old system of employing floormen who manually moved the oysters and shells by means of wheelbarrows. During the 1972/73 season, 86,833 gallons of oysters were shipped from the plant.

Another labor saving device was introduced to the plant in 1975 with the purchase of 45 "oyster breakers." These electric powered rotary machines enabled the workers to efficiently break the shell to facilitate shucking the oyster. Prior to the use of the breaker, a shucker had to break the shell manually or open the oyster with just the knife blade.

With Charles Denton's death in 1976, the corporation continued with Joseph succeeding his father as president while his brother, C. Geoffrey Denton, became vice-president. Fern Connor continued as secretary-treasurer. According to the minutes of a November 1976 stockholders meeting, costs continued to increase while volume decreased, resulting in a 50% reduction in profit over the preceding five years. Factors cited as contributing to the downturn included increased competition from Virginia packers and the closure of once productive oyster beds due to pollution. By 1977 the workforce had dropped to 47 workers.

As the family scaled down their seafood business, they began selling their fleet of vessels. The dredge boat *Patuxent*, purchased from the Patuxent Oyster Company of Benedict in 1971, was sold in 1974. In 1977, the *Lillian T*. was sold to Richard Parks of Reedville, Virginia. The *Lancaster* was sold to Davis Gray of Broomes Island in 1980. By this time, oyster buyers who drove trucks to state

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regulated oyster buying stations at Solomons, Benedict, and other waterside communities where oysters were bought from watermen had replaced the traditional buyboat.

In 1982, the company employed about 25 oyster shuckers and less than 20% of the oysters processed came from local waters. Due to the depletion of the local oyster population and increasing production costs, the company closed at the end of the 1982 season and the stockholders elected to liquidate the corporation's assets September 30, 1983. By that time, it was the last of the working packinghouses in Calvert County and the last major seafood business on the Patuxent River.

After the packing plant closed, Norman Dorrell, an Eastern Shore waterman who docked his boat at the Denton plant, approached the owners of the property with an offer to lease it. In 1984, he reopened the business with the intention of operating a year round seafood packinghouse. Having experience in the trucking business, he continued the practice of shipping oysters from outside the area to supply the packinghouse. In the summer season, the plant shucked and packed soft-shell clams.

Eventually, picking and packing crabmeat was added to the seafood operation and became its principle business. To keep production costs down, Mexican migrant laborers were employed as crab pickers. The Denton family retained ownership of the building and grounds while Dorrell operated the business as Warren Denton Seafood.

In the face of declining crab harvests and increasing competition from foreign seafood packers, Norman Dorrell declared bankruptcy in 2001 and Warren Denton Seafood closed its doors. Louis P. Stone, owner of the adjacent Stoney's Seafood Restaurant, purchased the property from the Denton family in 2002.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Inventory No. CT-1293

Warren Denton Seafood Collection, CMM MS 014, Calvert Marine Museum Archives Calvert Independent, 10/21/1971, 02/13/1980, 09/26/1984
The Times, 10/11/1984

Patuxent River Folklife Project Interviews: PRP PKR 4, 5, 49, 50, PRP PJR 22, 34, 52, Calvert Marine Museum Archives Johnson, Paula J., *Historical Tours through Southern Maryland: Broomes Island*, Southern Maryland Today, LaPlata: 1983 Johnson, Paula J., ed., *Working the Water*, Calvert Marine Museum and University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville: 1988

10. Geographical D	ographical Data			
Acreage of surveyed property	Уч а.	_		
Acreage of historical setting Quadrangle name	Broomes Island	Quadrangle scale:	1:24,000	

Verbal boundary description and justification

The building is located at 3946 Oyster House Road at Broomes Island, Maryland. Its lot is identified as parcel 15 on tax map 36C. A verbal description of the historical boundary of the 1.3-acre lot is given in liber KPS/1684/574.

Refer to accompanying detail of Broomes Island MD 7.5 quadrangle for relative location.

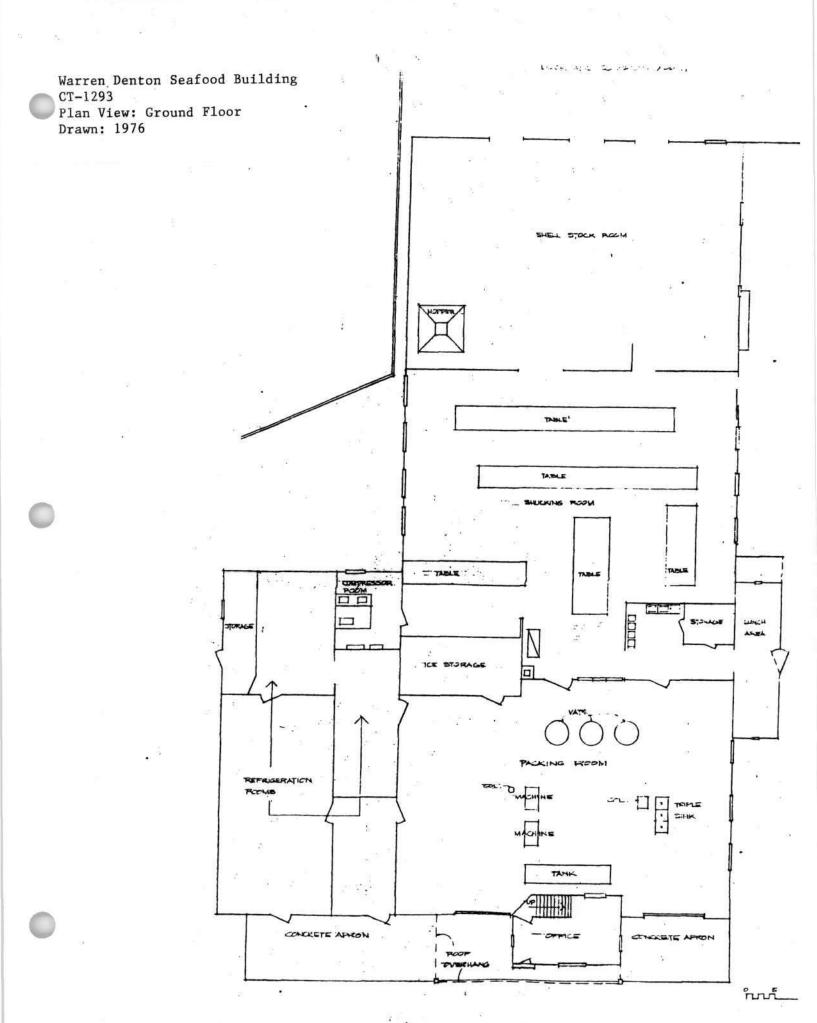
11. Form Prepared by			
name/title	Robert J. Hurry, Registrar		
organization	Calvert Marine Museum	date	07/01/2003
street & number	P.O. Box 97	telephone	410-326-2042, ext. 35
city or town	Solomons	state	MD

The Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties was officially created by an Act of the Maryland Legislature to be found in the Annotated Code of Maryland, Article 41, Section 181 KA, 1974 supplement.

The survey and inventory are being prepared for information and record purposes only and do not constitute any infringement of individual property rights.

return to:

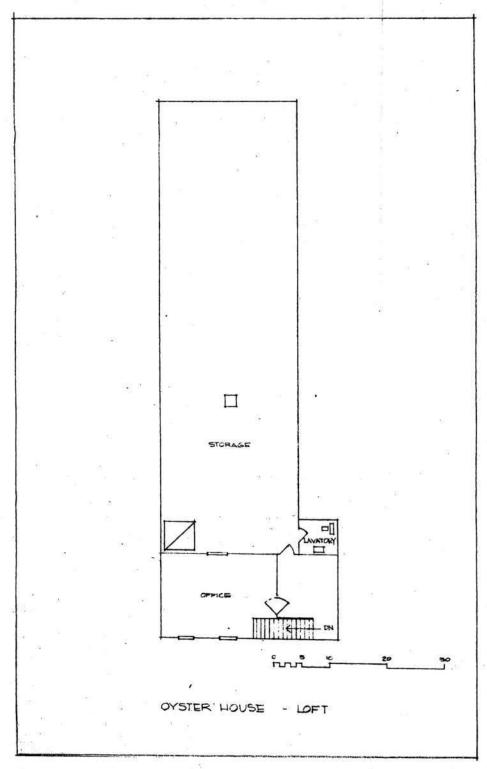
Maryland Historical Trust DHCD/DHCP 100 Community Place Crownsville, MD 21032-2023 410-514-7600



Warren Denton Seafood Building CT-1293

Plan View: Second Floor

Drawn: 1976





CT-1293
WARREN DENTON SEADOOD BUILDING
CALVERT COUNTY, MARYLAND
Detail of U.S.G.S. 7.5 MINUTE
BROOMES ISLAND, MD QUADRANGLE

↑ NORTH



CT- 1293 Warren Denton Seafood Calvert County, Maryland Robert J. Hurry 01/10/2002 Calvert Marine Museum neg. 2164-1/17A Seafood Packing Plant, looking West-North-West



CT- 1293 warren Denton Seafood

Calvert County, Maryland

01/10/2002 calvert Marine Museum Neg No 2164-1/11A

Robert J. Hurry

seafood Packing Plant, looking South-South-East



CT - 1293

Richard J. Dodds

08/20/2002

Warren Denton Seafood

calvert County, Maryland

Calvert Marine Museum neg. 2172-2/22

Seafood Packing Plant, looking East . North East



Warren Denton Seafood, CT-1293, c. early 1940s

CT-1293 Warren Denton Seafood C. early 1940s